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Creative writing is not a magical art from magic wands, but an everyday practice in the hands of steady writers. Creative writing calls, above all, for self-discipline. Along with intellectual and emotional stamina, a poetic writer needs sensory awareness. The writer also forms a mysterious sixth sense--intuition. In search of the good words, the creative writer, as a surprising bonus, develops vocational skills. Because of its figurative use of words, poetic writing challenges both writer and reader to analyze and interpret texts. (Author/CR)

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# Plying at Poetic Writing

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## Abstract

This paper sets out to remind writers and writing instructors that creative writing is *not* a magical art from magic wands, but an everyday practice in the hands of steady writers. Creative writing calls, above all, for self-discipline. Along with intellectual and emotional stamina, a poetic writer needs sensory awareness. The writer also forms a mysterious sixth sense — intuition. In search of the good words, the creative writer, as a surprising bonus, develops vocational skills.

# Plying at Poetic Writing

In "A Tuft of Flowers," Robert Frost shows one field hand's appreciation of another's efforts. "Men work together," [says Frost], "from the heart, / Whether they work together or apart." Frost himself works mostly apart from ages 19 to 39, under the auspices of his grandfather. Yet at age 86, he works together with the president of the United States. At John F. Kennedy's inauguration, he reads the entire nation "The Gift Outright." Emily Dickinson also works apart, outwardly, scribbling poetic notes on back of envelopes and on scraps of paper, and then reworking the words into beautiful forms. Yet, through her "letter to the world," her 600-plus poems to her readers, she obviously works together, too. James Michener, the prolific blue-collar writer, also works both together and apart, rising early every morning, tapping out vivid trips on the typewriter, taking future readers to "Texas," "Alaska," "Hawaii," "Space," "Paradise." In all, he works up 24 historical novels, as well as 27 other books. Such authors as Michener, Dickinson, and Frost poeticize the reader's world, working words for a powerful effect and bringing a moral sentiment home. In the hands of everyday writers, creative writing comes not as magical art from magic wands, but as a persistent practice from steady pens.

Creative writing calls, above all, for self-discipline. Whether a beginner or a veteran of word-working, a writer must devote considerable mental and emotional energy to every new project. Writer and writing instructor Natalie Goldberg follows definite rules for daily practice. Inasmuch as possible, she "keeps the hand moving," "forgets about formalities," "stays with the first flash," and "gets below the label" (Goldberg, 1990, pp. 2-4). She also urges her students to adopt a writing schedule. This writer and writing instructor, for one, often puts pen to notebook in the dark before dawn, before the day's duties and cares have obliterated fresh thoughts, impressions, possibilities. Another writer, following Longfellow's lead, might search for the right

words in the twilight, "when day is done." Practice encourages not only patience and endurance, but, oddly enough, spontaneity and ingenuity. "Writers work diligently," writer and writing instructor Brooke Sanderson explains, "to perfect a vision" (Cobine, course, 1997). It is to this "vision" that Goldberg alludes in her definition of "waiting": *not* expecting magical inspiration before beginning to write, *but* pausing to rest before renewing an effort already begun (p. 211).

Along with intellectual and emotional stamina, a writer needs sensory awareness. Unfortunately, humans cannot sense the world instantaneously, say neuroscientists, because every one of the five human senses "shatters experience into fragments" (Brownlee & Watson, 1997, p. 52). Whereas this limited "version of the world" may content many, a writer strives to harmonize sights, sounds, scents, tastes, textures, movements — into one dominant impression or idea. For instance, in "A Talking Pig and a Man of Few Words," a movie review of Babe (Universal, 1995), this writer tries to illustrate a shy man's hidden spirit by bringing out the sensory details in a key scene: "Arms akimbo, prancing on the carpet before the hearth, careening sideways across the floor, swaying, kicking up his boot heels, doffing his cap, the farmer entertains the little pig. Suddenly, he leaps and twists in mid-air — in a slow-motion shot — shouting with joy." In other words, a writer wants to draw on all five senses fully enough to restore the world and refresh the reader. As Goldberg points out, writers seek the "*original* details" (p. 204). One of her "Try this" exercises has the writer take a "cosmic statement" and make a list of 36 "solid details" illustrating the idea (p. 210). Another exercise asks the writer to picture a familiar place, yet to recall the very first impressions, the original perceptions of scent, color, shape, movement (p. 207). To describe a scene thoroughly, a writer must balance all five senses, because only with the help of the other senses, say physiologists, can one sense reassemble the world (Brownlee & Watson, 1997). In addition, the senses may summon emotions and thoughts. Psychologists think that the sense of smell, for instance, can carry a mood and initiate a memory (Brownlee & Watson, 1997). Perhaps a distinct sound can literally make a thought pop into the head. In any case, "sharp details," as writer and writing instructor Shakir Mustafa stresses, "make all the difference" in making known "a condition, an emotion, a state of mind" (Cobine, course, 1997).

A writer also wants that mysterious sixth sense — intuition — to come alive. Carol Pearson, a consultant for both personal and professional creativity, uses writing exercises to uncover "the heroes that lie within" her clients: A "wanderer" might write about a quest resolutely undertaken; a "warrior," a conflict courageously faced; a "martyr," a conscientious sacrifice willingly and joyfully made; a "magician," a remarkable endeavor (Pearson, 1989). By adopting the attitude of a psychological type and studying subsequent dreams, fantasies, and stories, her clients try to turn possibilities into worthy realities. With similar insight, a writing instructor can devise exercises for connecting personal metaphors with social symbols, for making writing meaningful to others (Stewart, 1997). For instance, in daydreaming on paper about the death of his father, this writer describes a church-like dwelling where friends converge to console one another. Eventually, in "The Farther House," a story about death and rebirth, this surreal place serves, especially for readers enduring grief or sorrow, as a metaphor for fellowship (Cobine, journal, 1997).

For their effort in search of the good words, writers develop, as a bonus, vocational skills. Because of its figurative use of words, poetic writing challenges both writer and reader to analyze and interpret texts. Law professors even advise prospective lawyers to study poetry, since both poets and lawyers look for multiple meanings and guess an author's intent (Frankenbach, 1989, citing a paper by George Gopen, 1984). At the same time, because of its simple, yet expressive choice of words, poetic writing offers adult learners an especially satisfying way to literacy (Frankenbach, 1989, citing the work of Francis Kazemek, 1985, 1987). A reader generally appreciates a poetic way with words — a careful description, a striking metaphor, a helpful analogy, an apt moral. Thus, writers work at giving readers a way with words.

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